



Address by

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**REGIONAL DIRECTOR**

**WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION**

on the occasion of

**WORLD HEALTH DAY**

**7 April 2017**

Your Excellency, Mr Saad Hariri, Prime Minister of Lebanon,  
Honourable Mr Ghassan Hasbani, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Health of  
Lebanon,  
Esteemed Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the commemoration of World Health Day, which marks the founding of the World Health Organization on 7 April 1948. First, allow me to express my gratitude to the President of Lebanon, Mr Michel Aoun, and to His Excellency the Prime Minister of Lebanon, Saad Hariri for their reception and hospitality, and for their support in organizing this event here at the Grand Serail. We also value the generous support provided by the Honourable Mr Ghassan Hasbani, Minister of Public Health, to the World Health Organization representatives in Lebanon, and the resources he committed from the Ministry of Health for implementing the Organization's directives.

Every year on the day of its establishment, the World Health Organization highlights an issue of critical health and social importance that poses a challenge to health at global level. This year we are focusing on depression, which is a public health concern globally, and in the Eastern Mediterranean Region in particular because of the emergencies and unprecedented circumstances that some countries of our Region are going through. WHO estimates that the impact of these ongoing emergencies can lead to a two-fold increase in the rates of anxiety, and a three-fold increase in rates of depression.

Currently, there are more than 300 million people living with depression around the world. If untreated, depression can result in loss of productivity and income, poor access to education and health care, social exclusion, tobacco and substance use. Depression can also contribute to significant social, economic and development costs, many of which are borne by the most vulnerable groups of the population, such as adolescents and young adults, women following childbirth and adults over 60.

These losses are avoidable. Depression can be treated, and everyone can do something to improve mental health services and care, raise awareness, provide the needed support, and fight the stigma that is stopping people from seeking, and getting, the help they deserve.

Esteemed Guests,

Today, we gather in Lebanon because we are committed to preventing and treating depression, and to fighting the stigma that is hindering the affected people and their families from seeking and getting help. By now, many of you must be wondering why here? Why Lebanon? The answer is simple. Lebanon is among the countries that have made great strides in scaling up the provision of mental health care. In Lebanon, mental health care is integrated within primary health care and is supported by policy and legislative frameworks that apply not only to its own citizens but also to the large number of displaced people, from neighbouring countries. Today, we launch our World Health Day campaign from this historic and culturally diverse country, which is distinct in its provision of comprehensive health services. In Lebanon, the government and its dedicated workers are making a difference in the lives of the many populations residing here.

I therefore ask that we take a moment and applaud Lebanon for its efforts – government and people – and for setting an example to be followed.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here to commend, and to support further action from Lebanon and other countries in this region. By using the regional framework for action on mental health, we can scale up action on mental health and bridge the treatment gap for mental disorders in general and depression in particular. This framework was developed by the Regional Office and endorsed by all countries in the Region in 2015. The regional framework operationalizes the provisions of the mental health action plan for 2013 to 2020, and provides countries with a roadmap for scaling up action on mental health. Implementing the framework will strengthen national mental health programmes and improve access to health and social care. Lebanon was guided by this framework, and made the commitment to move forward, and so can other countries.

Honourable and Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to re-emphasize the main message of our gathering here today: that depression is an eminently treatable condition and that we all have a role in helping people with depression get the treatment and care they deserve. We have the necessary evidence-informed interventions, guidelines and tools. Let us start today and work together to improve mental health services and care, fight the stigma and encourage people to speak out. This is the message of our slogan for World Health Day this year – Depression: Let's Talk.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I assure you that WHO stands ready to support, contribute to and collaborate in efforts aiming to improve mental health services and care for all countries in our region, so that people living with mental health disorders are dealt with in positive and inclusive manner.

Finally, allow me to close by expressing my gratitude once again to His Excellency the Prime Minister of Lebanon, who has graciously supported this celebration under his patronage, to the Minister of Public Health as well as the dedicated workers in the Ministry of Public Health and the WHO Representative Office in Lebanon, to the media personnel, and to all the people that worked tirelessly to make this unique celebration happen. My sincerest thanks to everyone.

May God bless you all.